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TUESDAY
June 7, 2005

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Article Last Updated: 05/14/2005 01:43:54 PM

The brief but wonderful return of Cathedral in the Desert

By Jim Stiles

It looked almost exactly like Phil Hyde's photograph taken in 1964, a year after Glen Canyon Dam began backing up the Colorado River - a seven-year event.

Hyde's photo revealed a stunning waterfall in a giant amphitheater with a narrow, almost slot opening at top, perfectly named "Cathedral in the Desert." Eventually it disappeared, drowned in 150 feet of reservoir, coyly named Lake Powell. But drought can perform miracles, and we had Ed Abbey's words to remind us that the cathedral and the rest of inundated Glen Canyon weren't gone at all; they were, he insisted, in "liquid storage."



Jim Stiles

He was more right than he knew. Two years ago, when the drought had already pulled the reservoir level down by 90 feet, I traveled to Lake Powell with Rich Ingebretsen, president of the Glen Canyon Institute, which wants to breach Glen Canyon Dam. We went by boat from Hall's Crossing to the "Escalante Arm" of Lake Powell, then left up a side canyon to where we thought the cathedral should be. We guessed right.

It was still difficult to gauge our location from old photos because we were floating 60 feet above the old canyon floor. But as we made a tight turn to the left, we spotted the top of the waterfall that once marked the upstream terminus of the cathedral, just four or five feet beneath us, still submerged. We were that tantalizingly close.

We wondered, as we reluctantly departed later that day, if this was as close

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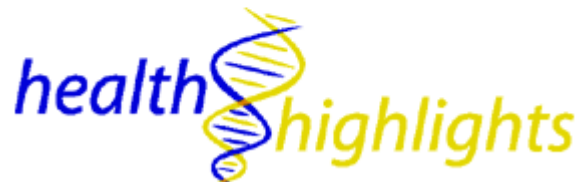
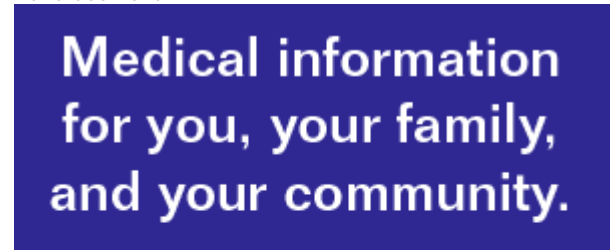
as we'd ever come.

This spring, drought brought us an answer. Lake Powell had dropped another 60 feet, and in April, Ingebretsen and I traveled again to the cathedral by motorboat, the very form of transportation that would become obsolete if the reservoir ever runs dry. We had come to see one of the most stunning sights on Earth, one that no one had viewed in almost 40 years.

It took an hour to go from Hall's Crossing to the mouth of the Escalante River, then up Clear Creek to where the canyon appeared to close in. This time there was a slot at the back of the chamber, and there it was above us, the waterfall, flowing freely as spring runoff cascaded over the sculptured lip of the dropoff and spattered into a pool, 50 feet below. We parked the boat and walked in.

The dark desert varnish around the waterfall had not faded in 40 years. The striations that were so clearly visible in Hyde's images from 1964, were just as

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sharply defined. We looked at each other, almost in disbelief, and we found ourselves speaking in whispered tones.

Ingebretsen said softly, "This is where Hyde stood . . . this is where (David) Brower stood." And it was still there, just waiting for Nature to expose the rock and for us to return.

We noted the seeps oozing from the canyon

walls and a hint of green around those wet places in the Navajo sandstone. Nature was already at work. From time to time, we came upon an old beer can or piece of rope or lost thermos cup, detritus of the motorized recreation in the holy chamber. But what surprised us was how little garbage there was.

The Cathedral in the Desert, without any help from us, was, in the most tranquil way imaginable, restoring itself. All it needed from us was time. And there's the rub.

If this year's heavy snowpack in the Rocky Mountains turns out to be an aberration, and if, as a result, the reservoir continues to shrink, today's fierce economic and environmental arguments about the dam become irrelevant. The cathedral will re-emerge without any help from us.

But as we motored away, we were already aware that this year's spring runoff will be massive, and that the reservoir will rise at least 30 feet, perhaps even 50 feet or more. If the scientists are wrong, or the timing is off by many

years, 2005 may have been Cathedral in the Desert's one brief moment more in the light of day.

Already, in early May, houseboats floated above it as the reservoir steadily rose. For now, I take comfort in knowing that a cathedral really is down there, "in liquid storage," waiting for an enlightened future to let her shine again.

Jim Stiles is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News (hcn.org). He is the editor of the Canyon Country Zephyr, published six times a year in Moab.

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